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AUTHOR Fish, Barry; Kaplan, Kalman J.
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AVAILABLE FROM Barry Fish, Department of Psychology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
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ABSTRACT

How can a person be induced to do something he might not ordinarily do? What constitutes a commitment on his part of some future action? Past research indicates that compliance with a small, relatively innocuous "foot-in-the-door" request serves to increase, relative to a control group, subsequent compliance with a larger request directed toward the same goal. The present study suggests such commitment (increasing) effects may be limited to active "feet-in-the-door," predicting substitution (decreasing) effects for passive (less effortful) "foot-in-the-door" compliance. Results support only the substitution predictions and show none of the commitment effects previously demonstrated in the literature for active "foot-in-the-door" compliance. Attempts to resolve these discrepant findings generate a two-factor model, specifying both the degree of initial commitment and the active versus passive nature of the "foot-in-the-door" requests. Specifically, active "foot-in-the-door" compliance and low degrees of initial commitment seem to produce commitment effects; passive compliance and high initial commitment tend toward substitution effects. (Author)

DOES A "FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR" GET YOU IN OR OUT?

Barry Fish

and

Kalman J. Kaplan

Eastern Michigan University

Wayne State University

How can a person be induced to do something he might not ordinarily do? What constitutes a commitment on his part for some future action? Though these questions have long been crucial to dissonance theory (see Brehm and Cohen, 1962) among other areas of social psychology, it is only recently that they have begun to be quantified. Evidence by Freedman and Fraser (1966), for example, indicates that compliance by subjects with a small request tends to greatly increase the chances they will subsequently comply with a larger request relative to a control group who had never been previously contacted. This so-called "foot-in-the-door" effect, moreover, seems to persist to some degree even when the two requests are made by different people and are not obviously related to the same goal.

This "if they give an inch, you can take a mile" notion has much intuitive appeal. It is implied in the advertising approaches aimed at eliciting some mild and innocuous initial commitment on the part of the consumer--such as his returning a postcard for more information and a free gift--as a prelude to bigger and better things. This conception also seems to underly many of the techniques used in brainwashing prisoners of war (see Schein, Schneier, and Backer, 1961, for an account of brainwashing in the Korean War) where compliance with small,

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seemingly harmless, requests often preceded major behavior changes on the part of the prisoners.

Yet the uneasy feeling persists that a "foot-in-the-door" will not always get you in; that at times, it will close the door more solidly than if you had never extended your limb at all. Consider as an example of this latter phenomenon the issue of tokenism. Here what apparently happens is that compliance with a small request gets the actor off the hook in terms of complying with a more demanding request directed toward the same goal. Thus, a mildly anti-war professor may indeed feel less compelled to participate in a peace rally given that he has already made a token donation to the anti-war movement.

Put more formally, the question becomes, when will compliance with a "foot-in-the-door" request serve as a commitment versus a substitute for some demanding action directed toward the same goal? More precisely, when will it lower (substitute) versus raise (commit) the elicitation rate of this more demanding action relative to a control group receiving no initial "foot-in-the-door" request? The example of the mildly anti-war professor just discussed suggests that the substitution effect may dominate when the goal is one toward which the subject already feels morally obligated, though unenthusiastic. Here compliance with a "foot-in-the-door" request may well elicit the cognition "I have done my share." On the other hand, a "foot-in-the-door" request may be useful in establishing or clarifying a moral obligation when such obligation is initially absent or ambiguous.

The present study focuses on another factor we think useful in differentiating the commitment versus substitution functions of compliance with a "foot-in-the-door" request--specifically, the active versus passive nature of this compliance. It seems reasonable that passive "foot-in-the-door" compliance is likely to lead to substitution. Specifically, it seems to serve a drive-reduction function unaccompanied by any real sense of expended effort, thus producing a state of demotivating complacency. For active "foot-in-the-door" compliance on the other hand, commitment is present, any feeling of complacency likely overshadowed by remotivating "effort-justification" processes--i.e., the need to justify past actions by revaluing the worth of the goal (c.f. Jones and Gerrard, 1967). Support for this latter position can be found in the previously cited commitment "foot-in-the-door" effects (Freedman and Fraser, 1966). These effects derived from active "foot-in-the-door" compliance, the request involving signing petitions or answering questions on a telephone. The present study attempts to manipulate compliance with active versus passive "foot-in-the-door" requests, examining their differential effects relative to a control group on compliance with a subsequent more demanding goal-directed behavior.

Method

Subjects

In the spring and summer of 1968, 151 Wayne State University introductory psychology students participated in this experiment as part of an educational and action series on problems in poverty in the Detroit community. The help of several welfare agencies in the area was

solicited. All groups were run as intact classes ranging in size from 16 to 34.

Procedure

"Foot-in-the-door" manipulations. As indicated in the introduction, we attempted to manipulate active versus passive "foot-in-the-door" requests during the first contact with the Ss. These requests were made by a male E well-versed on the poverty situation in the Detroit area as part of a program aimed at comparing the effectiveness of alternative educational strategies in awakening the Wayne student body to "poverty problems in the Detroit community". Specifically, Ss thought that they were in a learning situation of sorts, the aim on their parts being to learn all they could about the poverty problem.

Our active group was requested to write a short essay on "ways to fight poverty" while one of our passive groups was requested to listen to a lecture on the same topic by the male experimenter. Compliant Ss then proceeded to carry out the task they had agreed to. In neither case, we should emphasize, was compliance compelled, Ss making individualized private decisions. Nevertheless, some social contagion effects may have been in operation, less than 10 Ss overall refusing to comply. Following Freedman and Fraser, noncompliant Ss were run through the remainder of the experiment and included in the N for their respective cells, thus representing a conservative test of our hypotheses.

To control for idiosyncratic content² differences between our

active (essay-writing) and passive (listening to lecture) requests, a second passive group was established. Ss in this group were led to believe that they at some future time would be asked to write a short essay on ways to fight poverty. This group, it was reasoned, would permit a request-same comparison between active and passive "feet-in-the-door" (that is, anticipated versus actual essay writing). A fourth group served as a control receiving no initial visit or request from the male experimenter.

The criterion behaviors. On the basis of the pretests, "volunteering time and services to a welfare agency" and "contributing money to a welfare agency" were used as the functional and demanding criterion behaviors. One to two weeks after the first (foot-in-the-door) contact, a female E working in connection with the Central Volunteer Bureau, in the Detroit community, approached 38 Ss for money contributions and the remaining 113 Ss with an appeal for volunteers. Individualized envelopes and fill-out sheets were used to insure privacy of responses. No Ss were offered more than one option. All contributions and lists of names, of course, were turned over the the welfare agency.

Design

The time interval and the difference in Es between the two sessions helped minimize contextual inter-session similarities. All four initial contact groups were requested to comply with one of the two criterion behaviors discussed above. The 59 "essay-writing" foot-in-the-door Ss (either anticipated or actual) were given the opportunity to volun-

teer their services to a welfare agency. "Listening-to-talk" and control Ss were divided into two groups; 54 Ss (27 controls and 27 "talks") were given the opportunity to volunteer to a welfare agency while the remaining 38 Ss (16 controls and 22 "talks") were requested to contribute money to the poverty program. This design is summarized in Table 1.

Dependent Measure

The dependent measure was simply the proportion of Ss volunteering their services or contributing money depending on their respective experimental conditions. Specifically these proportions were compared to the base rate emanating from the two control groups, a positive discrepancy indicating commitment and a negative discrepancy indicating substitution. The z statistic was used to test differences between proportions (Hays, 1963).

Results

As can be seen in Table 1 both of the passive "foot-in-the-door" manipulations served as behavioral substitutes for the criterion act of volunteering one's time and services to a welfare agency, specifically, both the "listening-to-talk" and "anticipated-essay-writing" groups showed significantly lower proportions of volunteers (differences = $-.22$, and $-.21$, respectively, $p < .05$ in both cases) than that exhibited by the control group. Contrary to predictions and to the Freedman and Fraser findings, the active "foot-in-the-door" manipulation (i.e., actual essay writing) did not produce a significantly higher percentage

of volunteers than the control group, though the trend was slightly in this direction. However, as is obvious from the table, the active manipulation did produce significantly different effects than did either of the two passive ones ($p < .05$). Thus, while it is not clear that an active "foot-in-the-door" serves as a commitment, it is clear that it, unlike our passive "feet-in-the-door", does not serve as a substitute.

TABLE 1

Active versus Passive "Foot-in-the-door" Effects

	Proportion Complying with Criterion Request	Discrepancy from Respective Baseline ^a	N
<u>Volunteering Time and Services</u>			
<u>Control Group (Base Rate)</u>			
No "foot-in-the-door" request	.33	-----	27
<u>Active Group</u>			
Actual essay-writing group	.36	.03	25
<u>Passive Groups</u>			
Listening-to-talk group	.11	-.22*	27
Anticipated essay-writing group	.12	-.21*	34
<u>Contributing Money</u>			
<u>Control Group (Base Rate)</u>			
No "foot-in-the-door" request	.69	-----	16
<u>Passive Group</u>			
Listening-to-talk group	.18	-.51**	22

a. A positive discrepancy indicates commitment; a negative discrepancy indicates substitutability.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Examination of the second criterion behavior, i.e., contributing money to the fight on poverty, lends support to the substitutibility characteristics of the passive "listening-to-talk" manipulation. In the only comparison available for this criterion measure, the group presented with the initial "listening-to-talk" request showed a much smaller proportion of contributors than did the respective control group receiving no such initial request (difference = $-.51$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

These results seem to have expanded on the Freedman and Fraser research in demonstrating the tokenism or substitution potential inherent in some "foot-in-the-door" requests generated a substitution effect, the proportion of subsequent volunteers and/or contributors being significantly less than that shown by either the active "foot-in-the-door" or the one-contact control group. As should be remembered, our rationale for using two passive groups was to control both "content" and "actual versus anticipated performance" dissimilarities between our active and passive requests. Compliant ss in both the "listening-to-talk" and "actual-essay-writing" conditions actually performed the behaviors they had agreed to though the specific content and associated effort involved in this performance was obviously different, i.e., listening versus writing. ss in the passive "anticipated-essay-writing" group, though never actually performing the action, provide a content control for the active "actual-essay-writing" group. Convergent validity is provided by the similar patterns in volunteering deriving from the two passive

groups. Further convergent validity is provided by the similarity in patterns exhibited by the "listening-to-talk" group across the two criterion behaviors, volunteering and contributing.

Consider however the lack of significant commitment effects deriving from the active "foot-in-the-door" request. These results are perplexing, seemingly contradicting our theory and the Freedman and Fraser results. Our active "foot-in-the-door" request - asking a group to write a short essay - seems no less active than either of the two requests used by Freedman and Fraser, i.e., asking Ss to sign petitions or to answer questions over the telephone. Why then the discrepancy in the findings?

The best approach to this question lies, we feel, in a careful statement of the exact nature of this discrepancy. Analysis of a quasi-control group used by Freedman and Fraser - their so called "agree-only" group - begins to shed some light on this issue. Ss in this group were not actually required or for that matter allowed to carry out the "foot-in-the-door" request they had agreed to comply with. Though not labeled as such by Freedman and Fraser, this manipulation fits nicely into our definition of "passive" being similar in some respects to that utilized in our "anticipated-essay-writing" condition. Strikingly, this group, though exhibiting a mild commitment effect, shows considerably less subsequent compliance than does Freedman and Fraser's "performance" group containing Ss who actually carried out the request they had in theory agreed to comply with. Thus some similarities between our find-

ings and those shown by Freedman and Fraser begin to emerge. For both studies, active "foot-in-the-door" requests seem to generate more subsequent compliance than do passive requests, a finding hardly surprising in view of the effort justification hypothesis (Jones and Gerard, 1967) and McGuire's work on immunization (McGuire, 1964).

Thus, the discrepancy between our results and those obtained by Freedman and Fraser cannot be adequately explained by the active versus passive nature of the "foot-in-the-door" request. Why then do we generally obtain substitution effects while Freedman and Fraser consistently obtain commitment effects? Consider the exact definitions of substitution and commitment. They are defined not as any absolute compliance rates but as relative to the base rates shown by the one-contact control groups who receive no initial requests. Commitment is defined as greater and substitution as lesser compliance than these base rates. As the Freedman-Fraser base rates range between 16 and 27 percent, while ours range between 33 and 61 percent, the difference in the results deriving from the two studies becomes statistically quite understandable. Freedman and Fraser's low base rates leave more room for commitment effects; for high base rates as in this study, the probability of substitution effects is higher.

Yet, is this difference completely artifactual? Is there any theoretical meaning to the higher compliance base rates shown by our control groups than theirs? As has been previously mentioned, the goal of our requests was fighting poverty, an issue toward which most

students feel some moral obligation if not enthusiasm. Freedman and Fraser's goals seems less inherently obligating, involving among other actions the preparation of a consumer household guide. This returns us to a suggestion made in the introduction. Substitution effects may dominate when the goal is one toward which Ss are already morally obligated though unenthusiastic, initial compliance helping to cause demotivating complacency. Commitment effects may dominate, on the other hand, when this initial moral constraint is absent, "foot-in-the-door" compliance helping, perhaps, to establish it to some degree.

Thus, we seem to be proposing a two-factor theory, arguing that substitution-commitment effects represent a joint function of both the active-passive nature of the "foot-in-the-door" compliance and the degree of initial moral obligation. Specifically, while compliance with active "foot-in-the-door" requests may always generate more commitment or less substitution than does similar passive compliance, the determination of whether this effect be on the substitution or commitment side of the base rate seems governed by the degree of initial moral commitment.

Thus, our original predictions differentiating commitment effects for active "foot-in-the-door" compliance and substitution effects for passive "foot-in-the-door" compliance may be overly simple, only holding for cases where initial commitment is at a moderate level. In contrast, if the issue is one towards which the S is already morally

committed (i.e., high base rates), it is perhaps unwise to use any "foot-in-the-door" requests, they all being likely to lead to substitution effects. On the other hand, if it is one toward which such initial commitment is absent (i.e., low base rates) and "foot-in-the-door" request is likely to help (i.e., generate commitment effects) though an active one is likely to help more than a passive one.

In short, while a precise "in-out" split depends on the initial base levels, it can be stated with some confidence that active "foot-in-the-door" compliance gets you more "in" or less "out" than does passive compliance.

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1. Requests for reprints should be sent to Barry Fish, Department of Psychology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, 48197.
2. By content we do not mean to refer to any substantive issue similarities or dissimilarities between the various requests. Rather, we simply refer to the content of the actions themselves - writing (actual or anticipated) versus listening.